

Responding to the Proposed Form of Government

In presenting the summary of comments that have been received to date on *The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government*, Dick reported that everyone who has weighed in on this matter has expressed that there needs to be some level of consistency in matters of the Preparation for Ministry Committee and the Committee on Ministry. Council APPROVED submitting the following report to the national church as comments/suggestions/recommendations on the *Proposed Form of Government*.

**Presbytery of Grand Canyon Comments on the Drafts for Study
*The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government***

The following comments/suggestions/recommendations are based upon the study of the proposed documents by three small tasks groups which met separately and consisted of members from the Presbytery Council Planning Committee, the Preparation for Ministry Committee and the Committee on Ministry.

Overall Comments

We believe the Form of Government Task Force has done an excellent job in drafting for study the proposed *Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government*. They have faithfully carried out the charge given to them by the 217th General Assembly (2006):

“.....undertake a revision of the Form of Government in light of the foci and priorities described in (1)-(5) below.....

- (1) The new Form of Government shall preserve our foundational polity (perhaps most concisely laid out in the first four chapters of the current Form of Government).
- (2) The focus of the Form of Government shall be on providing leadership for local congregations as missional communities.
- (3) The presbytery shall continue as the central governmental unit, as it has been throughout most of our history. The Form of Government shall provide sufficient authority and flexibility to allow the presbytery to assist congregations in addressing the changing cultural, economic, and societal challenges in our new millennial world. The FOG Task Force shall take notice of and address the institutional and structural impediments that currently cripple so very many of our presbyteries.
- (4) The new Form of Government shall provide flexibility at all levels, granting authority while permitting governing bodies to develop the structures to carry out their respective missions.
- (5) The FOG Task Force shall be guided by the principles proposed by Recommendations 1-4 from the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, using those principles as a guide for its own processes and deliberations. They shall incorporate this new Presbyterian ethos into the Form of Government so that it truly functions as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s guidebook for mission.

In particular the Task Force has proposed language in the *Form of Government* that provides considerable flexibility and grants authority to presbyteries to develop their own “mechanisms and processes to serve as pastor and counselor to; to facilitate the relations between the presbytery and its congregations, ministers of Word and Sacrament.....and to settle difficulties on.....where possible and expedient.” (G-3.0308)

This proposed flexibility and authority however stands in tension with the need to maintain some level of consistency in certain matters such as the preparation for ministry process. Within our three task groups concern was expressed that: “The flexibility is good, but when every presbytery has the option to be that flexible, we are not going to know what is going on. We won’t be a national church.”

Overall however we like the style of writing in both documents. The wording seems clear, understandable, flows well together and they are easy to read.

Questions Posed in the Guidelines for Group Response

- Regarding the Foundations #5 – Do you believe that it would be.....first four chapters.....with the three chapters of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity? We have no particular comments to offer except to say we do not find the language to be all that different in reality to what already exists in the first four chapters. Some have expressed that they appreciate and prefer the wording of the current chapters.
- Regarding the Form of Government #2 – Has the proposed.....in your context and if so where? Frankly we are not quite so sure that the current Form of Government actually impedes mission. The response from one of our churches that studied the proposals said in part:
 - “Indeed, as we talked, we found that we had some serious reservations about the stated rationale for changing the Form of Government, i.e., that the existing Form of Government “as become a regulatory manual placing impractical limitations on the missional work of sessions and higher governing bodies” (from the Guidelines for Group Response). We found ourselves wishing that more specific instances had been offered as, again, we were unable to identify any such impractical limitations in our context. To be sure some aspects of the governance provided in the current Form of Government are at times inconvenient, but we all agreed that even these provide wise boundaries that guide and structure our work and life together.”
- Regarding G-3.0308 - Especially for COM and CPM #5 - both our CPM and COM committees had a strong response. We believe that if G-3.0308 merely spells out functions without mandating particular bodies to carry them out, there will be negative consequences. One consequence will be the tendency to “let the staff take care of it,” reducing the ownership and participation of the presbytery as a whole in the important work of preparation for ministry process or the work assigned to the current COM. Another danger might be the difficulty of presbyteries communicating with each other and working together when some have these committees and some do not. Therefore, we would urge the task force to rewrite this section so that the functions are assigned to particular groups, such as COMs and CPMs.
- Regarding G-2.0302. The requirement that to be valid a ministry must include proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments has been removed. We do agree with that decision.
- Regarding G-2.0303 a and b. We agree with the provisions that allow for a three-fourths of the presbytery to permit those in an associate or temporary pastoral positions to become the next installed pastor

Preparation for Ministry Response

Our committee studied and discussed those parts of the draft document that pertain to our work, especially G-2.0401-G-2.0410.

In response to the question concerning G-3.0308 posed to COMs and CPMs in the “guidelines for group response,” our committee has a strong response. We believe that if G-3.0308 merely spells out functions without mandating particular bodies to carry them out, there will be negative consequences. One consequence will be the tendency to “let the staff take care of it,” reducing the ownership and participation of the presbytery as a whole in the important work of preparation for ministry. Another danger might be the difficulty of presbyteries communicating with each other and working together when some have CPMs and some do not. Therefore, we would urge the task force to rewrite this section so that the functions are assigned to particular groups, such as COMs and CPMs.

Comments on specific sections that deal with preparation for ministry of Word and Sacrament (references are to new Form of Government):

2.0401

Inclusion of "their sessions" is helpful, but "congregations" is not. The covenant relationship includes session, so we would drop "congregations."

3.0107

This is a different location, covering all sorts of advisory handbooks.

Since Presbyteries have their own handbooks for CPM, CLP, etc., maybe this should specify Presbytery rather than "Councils higher than Session."

2.0402

"Active in the work and worship" is better than current language.

2.0403

Slight change with minimal impact.

2.0404

Better than current version.

2.0405

We think that this is much weaker than what we have now. Without specific tasks spelled out, it would be easy to cut corners. We like the current version in which Presbytery responsibility and session responsibility are spelled out. Of course these responsibilities could be included in the Advisory Handbook.

2.0406

Streamlined - OK.

[current 14.0421 ff.]

No "annual consultation" is required. Knowing our tendency to take the path of least resistance, we're afraid that the result would be neglect of inquirers and candidates.

Details on ordination exams are not included; they would have to be found in the new advisory handbooks.

We think that the deletion of this language would lead to greater variation between presbyteries than we currently have. We are concerned that we would lose the sense that there are churchwide standards.

2.0407

There is no "final assessment" as a formal category.

Paragraph "d." is unclear because it references PCC here (previous material on PCC is deleted). By dropping specific areas that exams cover, does this give PCC complete license to come up with new areas of examination? We lean toward preserving current provisions.

2.0408

Streamlined - OK.

2.0409

Sentence on individual's initiative is dropped. We would want to keep it since it is a covenantal agreement.

2.0410

Streamlined - OK.

2.0501

Good expansion.

2.0502

This is a change in the ordinary setting for ordination service. Some of us still think the Presbytery responsible for the candidate's preparation is where a candidate should be ordained, the candidate by this time is known by his local church, CPM, Presbytery, et. al., and we want to celebrate with great joy that the candidate completed the process.

Observations/comments by individuals who participated in the review process

- The Proposed FOG diminishes clearly the role of the church as a national church, and makes it more of a federacy of churches and not a national church
- It looks like it is more missional, more constitutional and less regulatory.
- It looks like it would provide more flexibility in functioning.
- I like the flexibility that the Proposed FOG offers. On the first page, the composition, membership of presbytery; it allows the presbytery to establish its own elder minister representation. Our current one is highly in favor of smaller churches at the expense of larger churches. I like that this allows the presbytery to set its own means of elder participation.
- It's a good illustration of how the new document provides flexibility to function with today's realities. It gives the freedom to structure elder commissioner representation in the way that suits them... There are some places that could be picked out for revision and improvement, but I would rather see this document adopted, as is, without any changes than see it sent back for more changes. If some things are problematic they can be amended.
- It offers flexibility in the section about pastors that aren't possible now. It offers the flexibility to allow a stated supply pastor to become the installed pastor in that church

Provided For Information Only – Response from First Presbyterian Church, Mesa

On Sunday, May 24th, several members of the staff and Session of First Presbyterian Church, Mesa, Arizona met for a review of the proposed Form of Government. We used the materials provided by the General Assembly Form of Government Task Force and had done quite of bit of reading before coming together.

We began by comparing notes about our answers to the preparatory questions and immediately found that none of us had been able to find any provision in the *Book of Order* that either impedes or ignites mission in our context. Indeed, as we talked, we found that we had some serious reservation about the stated rationale for changing the Form of Government, i.e., that the existing Form of Government “as become a regulatory manual placing impractical limitations on the missional work of sessions and higher governing bodies” (from the Guidelines for Group Response). We found ourselves wishing that more specific instances had been offered as again, we were unable to identify any such impractical limitations in our context. To be sure some aspects of the governance provided in the current Form of Government are at times inconvenient, but we all agreed that even these provide wise boundaries that guide and structure our work and life together.

Our first recommendation, therefore, is that if there are such “impractical limitations” then perhaps the first step should be to identify exactly what they are and work to change those specific parts of the Form of Government.

Furthermore, we found ourselves growing more and more ill-at-ease with the idea that local governing bodies may be invited to prepare guidelines on those issues left unanswered by the proposed Form of Government. It struck us that much of our connectional life is rooted in the uniformity of policy and procedure as one moves from one church to another, and one Presbytery to the next.

Chapter comments:

Chapter 1 – we found no guidance here on dealing with inactive members and overall found that we prefer what is currently in the *Book of Order*.

Chapter 2 – we found ourselves *very* uncomfortable with the potential for pastoral succession by both Associates and Interims. If this is an attempt to give larger churches more continuity when a senior pastor leaves then perhaps something more creative could be done with co-pastors (as many larger churches now already do). Such a solution reduces the temptation for Associates to sabotage the Head of Staff. As for interims, there may be less concern, except that in seeking to land an installed position from an interim position the interim may be tempted to avoid some of the tough but necessary work required in an effective interim.

Chapter 3 – we found this to be a good summary but not sufficient to ground and guide us.

Chapter 4 – we didn't find much different between this chapter and the current related chapter in the *Book of Order*.

Chapter 5 – again, we didn't see many differences here.

Chapter 6 – did not find this chapter any more or less helpful than what is already in use.

The bottom line for us was that the proposed Form of Government is “disturbing in its thin-ness” and “alarming in its timing” (direct quotes from members of our group). In other words, in times when there is high trust organizations can get by with less written guidance, but such is not the time in the PCUSA. Again, if there are specific areas that need to be changed to help ignite mission then let us deal with those, but a wholesale re-write of documents that even now are only barely holding us together seems ill advised.